

A Path to Wholeness and Well-Being

Sleep  
Pray  
Heal

DONNA FADO IVERY

ADVENTURES IN HEALING

*Sleep, Pray, Heal: A Path to Wholeness and Well-Being*

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*For Hubert, Aisha, Imani, Don and Jean,  
and the Spirit who uplifts, sustains and restores.*

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## PART I: BREAKING OPEN

*O sabbath rest of Galilee!  
O calm of hills above,  
where Jesus knelt to share with thee  
the silence of eternity interpreted by love.  
Drop thy still dews of quietness till all our striving cease;  
take from our souls the strain and stress,  
and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace.*

*John Greenleaf Whittier, 1872  
Dear Lord and Father of Mankind  
From his poem, "The Brewing of Soma"*

# 1: FALLEN

January 26, 1994

“WOULD IT BE POSSIBLE FOR US to have a table with a view?” I ask. My husband Hubert, in-laws Leroy and Eula, and daughters—four-year old Aisha and nine-month old Imani—are together on vacation and we are primed and ready to celebrate with a fancy meal. Twenty-two miles long and twelve miles wide, Lake Tahoe’s azure waters are really something to behold.

“Sure,” the hostess answers as she picks up a stack of leather-bound menus and leads us through a maze of aisles.

As I walk through the restaurant, I see that my question is moot. The lakeside exterior wall is glass. Interior frameless glass partitions, one after the other, create a seemingly seamless long glass wall that affords lakeside views at each table, as well as acoustic division. Two rows of dark wood and burnt orange leather booths transect the long room and create aisles. The foot of each glass partition is set into wood molding on the back of each booth, the tops mounted to the ceiling. Smaller tables that seat parties of four and two are sprinkled throughout. The design of the restaurant relays an ambience of woody elegance. *So fancy!*



## I: Fallen

“You guys should sit where you can see the view.” I offer the view seating to Eula and Leroy as I slide into the booth with my back facing the lake and scoot over next to the high chair on my right. Hubert is putting Imani in the high chair. Eula, Leroy, and Aisha are about to sit down. An earsplitting bellow stops them.

The falling plate glass roars like rumbling thunder. The very air protests with a siren maelstrom. The first strike of lightning hits its target, the base of my skull.

“BOOM.”

My head is forced forward. Instantaneously I brace it by holding onto my face as if I’m sobbing into my hands, covering my eyes and cheeks with my open palms. The glass partition hits the table top in front of me and rebounds.

“WAM.”

Its second lightning strike hits the left side of my head, just above my ear, and then slams onto the table in front of me. Amber glasses of ice water shatter, spewing jagged shards, cracked ice, and pools of water.

As if a bomb has completed its mission, the uproar stops. The over two-hundred-pound glass partition, five feet high by eight feet wide, and one-half inch thick, has separated from its ceiling moorings, fallen, and hit me twice on the head.

*Silence.*

Within the quiet beneath, at the very base of who I am,

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my soul-self spontaneously cries out. *Jesus, save me!*

In the ensuing hush I hear my own screams, an encore to the wailing protests of the air surrounding me.

*Earthquake*, I instantly construe, and believe the building has come down around us.

My gush of screams transmutes into words. “Where’s the baby?! Where’s the baby?! My baby!” Imani should be in the high chair just to my right. *Don’t pass out. You can’t pass out*, I tell myself. I should be able to reach her, but I can’t move. I am pinned down, smashed down, by the glass wall.

Hubert’s voice comes to me, like a life preserver tossed toward a drowning woman. “Donna! Donna! Everyone’s okay.”

Tumbling out like a raft careening down the rapids, I scream, “Get it off me! Get it off me! Get it off me!”

Hubert’s booming voice calls out, “Somebody help me get this off her!”

*I have never heard him yell so loudly.* Weird that he needs help. He is so strong.

One time at church, three men together carried a heavy pottery statue downstairs to a lower-level multipurpose room. Not having seen their struggle, Hubert merely lifted the same statue above his head and carried it back up the same stairs.

The smashing pressure lifts, but I don’t dare move. My

## I: Fallen

closed fists dig into the hollow just below my cheekbones, hitchhiker thumbs support my chin, my elbows a kickstand on the table top to stabilize my head and neck. If my neck is broken, I could be paralyzed.

*Don't move. Don't move.*

“Somebody call an ambulance!” Hubert yells out in an alarming voice, and then sits down next to me. Under the table, I feel his hand on my knee, tethering my trembling to his solid presence.

Fear fills me. I know I've been severely injured. What about my family? I want to survive.

## 7: UNCOVERING

January 1995

ONE YEAR AFTER MY HEAD INJURY, during the preponderance of hours lying in bed, a question continues to rise to the surface of my mind like a lapping tide. *What happened to me when the glass fell? O God, what the hell happened to me?*

As my therapist suggested, I decide to ask the question in a painting. *How do I do that? I don't know. Holy Spirit, lead me.*

Digging through my purse, I notice an old compact mirror with a cracked black plastic backing and an idea pops into my mind. I can paint the question, *What happened to me when the glass fell?* Tossing the compact into the laundry basket, I save steps by waiting until the laundry basket is full of diapers to hang out to dry on the line in the backyard. I throw the mirror onto the cement patio. *Nothing happens.* I try again, like throwing a fastball pitch, and *voilà* the mirror shatters.

Seated at the dining room table I look at myself in the mirrored wall and sketch with oil pastels a self portrait on newsprint. Following the pattern of the shattered mirror

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compact, I cut my self portrait out in the same pieces. Spacing apart the broken mirror pieces of my picture, I glue them onto a solid black twenty-two by thirty-inch masonite panel.

*Finally! What is invisible is made visible. This is what happens when glass falls.*

Missing connectors in my brain seem to have dismantled my ability to remember names, follow recipes, pronounce and find words, walk evenly, write, and see straight. I feel so pulled apart. The spaced-out painting in front of me represents the truth of what I feel inside. There are glitches, empty spaces in place of what should be connecting in my brain.

Hubert walks through the dining room, stops in his tracks, and asks incredulously, “Is that really how you feel?”

Softly, I utter, “Yes.”

From the outside, I look quite normal, which is why moderate traumatic brain injury is often called the invisible disability. The missing pieces, my disabilities, are all beneath the surface.

As I sit quietly to consider my appearance in the painting, Hubert stands silently beside me and places a sympathetic hand on my shoulder. Perhaps by seeing this, he can better understand some of the gaps that are apparent in my thinking and our abruptly altered life together.

Looking at the spaced-out pieces of myself before me, I feel in my gut that this is the truth. I’m glad that Hubert

7: Uncovering



*TBI Self Portrait: The Glass Fell*, multimedia, 22x28. 1995

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can now see it, too. When the painting is dry, I bring it to my counseling appointment. Hubert drives me to Fresno and brings a book to read.

The twenty-minute ride to Fresno to see Naomi, my therapist, always disorients me. The motion of the car seems to scatter my understanding, my speech, my wherewithal into thousands of fluttering confetti pieces. A quiet space and time to let the confetti settle is a necessity. Naomi and I sit and look at the painting in silence.

After a space of time, Naomi asks me, “Can you tell me about this painting?”

“Sure. I call it *TBI Self Portrait: The Glass Fell*. I prayed about what happens when glass falls and threw a mirror onto the ground to see.”

“Um hmm,” Naomi says, leaning forward in an effort to grasp each word. My speech is stilted.

I say as if telling a joke, “My friend, Gail, told me, ‘Fado, don’t you have enough bad luck without breaking mirrors?!’” We both chuckle. “I never thought of the bad luck part.” *But it doesn’t really matter to me because I don’t believe it.*

“When I cut my picture into the same pieces as the broken mirror and spaced them out a bit, it felt true; it resonated within me. There are spaces ... ” my words falter ... “blanks ... ” my lips and tongue have stopped cooperating to announce and I spit out each word, “in” ... “my” ... “brain.” There is much more that could be said, but it would

## 7: Uncovering

be too much work in this present moment. I'm outta gas.

"I like the way your skin is drawn on paper and looks like a thin covering over who you are," says Naomi.

"Um hmm," I mumble. I have never before thought of skin as a mere coating to the me inside. Fact is, I'd been disappointed in the appearance of the cheap newsprint and how it stretched and bubbled when adhered with white glue. Naomi's insight seems to underscore the importance of expressing the real inside of me and not just keeping up with the on-the-surface stuff. *Getting beneath the surface is the uncovering part of recovering.*

After what seems to be a longer moment of silence, Naomi says, "It's interesting to me how the empty spaces of your injury appear to be like chains binding you."

Leaning my chin into steeped fingers, I study the image. I have experienced the empty spaces of my brain injury as vast nothingness and not knowing. To see these broken cracks within me as a source of being chained is new. "I hadn't thought of that before. But it feels true. Brain injury enslaves me."

*I am body bound.* At times I feel as though my body is a paper scrim covering the real me beneath. *What happened to me when the glass fell?* My body is bound by brokenness.

The tangible creative interaction of the Holy Spirit feels something like brushstrokes creating an image that will be disclosed at an unknown moment. Sometimes a brushstroke



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is bold and compelling, and at other times light and barely distinguishable. It is good to work with the Holy Spirit, whom the Bible also calls Counselor. In this painting the “brushes of the Spirit” reflects back to me, like a counselor, making visible the impact of an invisible injury. The Spirit is the One who reflects back to me my testing out expressions of what is real, the One who is able to fill-in the unknown blank spaces of my brain injury. I hear a promise in *TBI Self Portrait: The Glass Fell*. God assures me:

*I will support you in this important work of uncovering what is real beneath the surface. My Holy Spirit will be your counselor in this important work of uncovering and recovering, your pathway to healing.*

## 9. Beautiful Mess

February 1995

MY SENSE OF FAILURE is difficult for me to cope with, even more so than the chronic pain I endure. Deep down I remain an overachiever, perfectionist, and product of the Protestant Work Ethic. Good or bad, my discipleship is firmly intertwined with doing well to please God. I used to fear that my world would fall apart if I didn't do my best. Now I live in the free fall of failure.

I set the egg timer to one hour at a time so that I keep to my physiatrist's prescribed one-hour-up for every one-hour-down schedule. When I retreat to the bedroom, a growing amoeba of clean clothes remind me of my failures. Laundry had been my job. Now the bending over, standing, leaning, and forgetting is too much for me, and Hubert has taken it on. My part of laundry is washing, hanging out, folding, and putting away cloth diapers. From bed I have an unobstructed view of the corner chair with a mound of clean clothes spilling over. The igloo of laundry is large enough for an adult to hide beneath. *What a mess.*

The pile of laundry reminds me of my shortcomings as a mother. *So painful.* It is unavoidable, ever present in my bedroom sanctuary where I rest and renew.

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Yesterday I had a meltdown about the laundry. I behaved like a screaming, raging, contentious bitch. *Poor Hubert.* There are about four feet between the foot of our queen bed and the master bathroom. This means that I walk four feet without a cane and without surfaces to skim with my hand to keep balance. Each morning before school, helpful Aisha digs through the pile to find clothes for herself and Imani, and leaves scattered clothes on the floor. I can't bend over to pick them up. On the path from bed to bathroom, I can't balance myself and step around an obstacle course. When I almost fell I blew a fuse.

*This just isn't right.* I project onto him my feelings of inadequacy. He can't seem to do anything right, and I let him know it—way too frequently.

Hubert irons the girls' clothing every single morning. They are always clean and presentable for kindergarten and preschool. He works at the church and has taken on the many tasks of being primary caregiver for the children, and for me. And yet, my kindness and appreciation is running on empty. I have become less flexible—no, intractable. I'm drowning in chaos within and around me.

Earlier in our marriage, when Aisha was a baby, I learned to let go of many of my mom expectations like on-time feeding and matching clothing. In Hayward, Hubert once delivered, like a sack of potatoes slung on his hip, nine-month-old Aisha to me at the church office. Aisha was safe

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in the crook of his arm, parallel to the ground, lifting her curly little head to look forward, smiling because she was with her daddy. She had on a pretty red and blue calico dress with a Peter Pan collar, a white pinafore beneath the dress like a slip rather than an apron, mismatched socks and no shoes. I learned to laugh in such instances. The fact that I once locked the keys in the car, with Aisha strapped into the infant carseat inside helped me to pare back my childrearing expectations. Which is worse, mismatched socks and an apron worn as a slip or a child locked alone in a car? It was a lesson for me: I constantly worked hard to discern what really mattered rather than the way I thought it should be, and let the rest go.

Now my brain can't seem to do the work of discerning what really matters. I'm too much of a mess. Everything's a mess. I pray, *Jesus, help me through this mess.*

One of my rehab activities is to watch a television show and at commercial break have Hubert quiz me about what I'd just seen and heard—a simple short-term memory rehabilitation exercise. We no longer watch the news together because I shield myself from the world's heartache. I hold too much heartache inside of me to withstand more. On our VCR we taped a few painting and sewing shows on PBS. Not Hubert's topic of interest, but he barreled on through and watched a sewing show with me a few times. It didn't work out so well.

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After five minutes of watching “Sewing with Nancy,” I press pause on the remote control and turn to Hubert. “Ask me something about what we’ve just seen.”

“Well,” he says with his gentlemanly smile and graceful gesture of his right hand, “Let me see ... ”

Silence. *Doesn't he know that the longer the pause, the less I'll remember?*

Frustrated, I urge him, “Yes?”

“You know the things they put on the fabric ... ”

“Pins? Patterns?”

“You know ... ” he replies, fishing for the word he can't recall.

Raising my voice, I assail, “Don't you know that I don't know!”

Our TV-question rehab sessions usually ended in turmoil with neither of us better for the wear. Soon I adjusted the exercise to let him off the hook. It would be better that I do it by myself.

I taped a twenty-two-minute oil painting demonstration on how to paint a seascape. This PBS show is by a traditional oil painter who emphasizes technique. I like the colors: variations of sea-blue, pale yellow, white, gray, and melon-orange. I like the foamy surf, gentle tide, and translucent colors shining through the waves. The ocean tide reminds me that God moves things that I don't need to push myself.

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*I'm so tired of pushing and pulling.* I hope that the “brushes of the Spirit” will imbue this painting with a serene seascape and this answer to my prayer: *Let God do the pushing and pulling.*

I press play and watch for five minutes. Pausing the tape, I do the steps as demonstrated. I squeeze out Titanium White, Ultramarine Blue, and Cadmium Yellow Light onto the paper palette. I know there are more. Which ones have I forgotten? I rewind, play, watch, and catch some of what I didn't remember. Pause. I squeeze out Ivory Black and Alizarin Crimson, too.

My painting lessons which are like short term memory rehab sessions, are replete with repetition.

- Play video for five minutes.
- Pause.
- Follow directions.
- Rewind.
- Play same video segment.
- Pause.
- Take note of what I forgot the last time.
- Follow directions.
- Rewind.
- Repeat.

Day after day, session after session, I pour myself into painting this simple seascape that a instructor completed in twenty-

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two minutes on television. He described this as a “beginner project,” a painting that anyone can do. No matter how hard I try, what’s on my canvas pad looks nothing like the teacher’s. It looks ridiculous. Yet another failure.

My failures snowball. Failure of my short term memory. Failure of my relating gently with my husband. Failure of my soothing and nurturing my children. Failure of my managing laundry. Failure of my own serenity. Alone in the house, my frustration overflowing, I stand up at the painting table and yell out “Aaugh!” like Charlie Brown. With a palette knife I scrape up a glob of wasted paint from the palette and furiously spread it onto the failed painting. From the bottom up, I slather leftover paint onto the canvas paper, sweeping strokes in long leaflike shapes. Overlaying, streaking, dabbing color. As the intensity of my emotion is matched in the motion of my hand, I enter the Zen zone. A place of release.

Painting like mad, I’m done in six minutes. With cheeks wet from tears, I go to bed. I feel let down by the “brushes of the Spirit.” God moving the surf in a seascape of serenity is not the answer to my prayer. Instead I have yet another failure to compound my chaos.

I’ve been asked to show two paintings at an art show at my parents’ church, the St. Mark’s United Methodist in Sacramento. Artwork must be framed for the show. I can’t get a frame

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for less than thirty dollars for a twenty-two by thirty-inch painting on masonite. The cost is prohibitive. My sister Patty offers to shop thrift stores for inexpensive frames. She arrives from San Francisco for a visit today. The girls are excited that she is coming. Me, too.

After a time of greeting and excitement, we gather in the living room. Patty wants to see my paintings. Hubert brings them in, one-by-one, from the garage, bedroom, and family room. Patty brings in frames from the cars. Lots of frames, piled in the crook of each arm and in her hands. Aisha helps, and carries a frame, too.

I'm astonished by the number, and worry about the mounting cost. "How much do I owe you?" I ask.

"Three dollars," replies Patty.

"Each?"

"No."

My forehead scrunches, chin lowers, and eyebrows raise to ask the silent question: *Are you lowballing the cost to help me out?*

"Donna, I get the frames for twenty-five cents each, and there are twelve of them."

*Whew.* "Great. Now that's a price I can afford."

"Aisha, would you please get my wallet from my purse and give Aunt Patty three dollars?"

Aisha hops up gladly, gets my purse, and sits down on the carpet. She is pleased to do a big girl task like counting money.



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Patty sits in the rocking chair. I lie down on the chaise and position a pillow behind my head for support. Hubert props each painting against the desk, couch, and wall, and then sits on the couch. Patty is eager to hear the stories behind the paintings. But my hour-up is done, and I'm pushing it. My words harder to enunciate, I keep it short, pointing to each painting.

- “This is my pain. I call it *Pain*.”
- “I call this, *TBI Self Portrait: The Glass Fell*. I broke a mirror to see what happens when glass falls, and cut my picture into the same pieces.”

Aisha gets up and moves close to Patty sitting in the rocking chair. She stands between Patty's knees and leans into her chest. Patty puts her arms around Aisha and pulls her in close. I continue.

- “This is my headache. Because the mirrors catch the light, I now see the purpose of my pain is to catch the light, to cry out for healing.”
- “This is a landscape.”

“It doesn't look like the others” Patty observes.

“I followed Bob Ross to learn how to paint it.”

Patty nods. “What about this one?” she asks, pointing to the failed seascape.

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“That’s a mess-up.” I say. I would have left that one in the garage. *It reminds me of a child having a tantrum scribbling in a coloring book.*

Patty exudes appreciation. “I love it. It’s really beautiful.”

For the next few days, especially during my lying-down-resting-time, my mind is fixated on Patty’s appraisal. *What I see as a mess, she sees as beautiful.* I name the painting *Beautiful Mess.*

I can feel the “brushes of the Spirit” move within me when I ponder the beauty in the messes around me. When I focus on the beauty—in the perpetual mound of clean clothes, stack of dirty dishes, and array of stuff left around—I breathe more easily. It feels as if a window has opened within my homebound, closed-in metal box of failure.

The Spirit graces me with an *aha!* moment of insight: I couldn’t paint the seascape because I was fooling myself. The answer to prayer I had sought was for Hubert to do more of the pushing and pulling, not God. I had been blaming Hubert for not doing the housework “right,” or as I would. I’ve been blaming myself for failing, not pushing and pulling as I used to do so easily. God is the only one who can move the ebb and flow of the tide. I must get off of my habitual pushing-and-pulling bandwagon, ride the wave, and let God.

9: Beautiful Mess



*Beautiful Mess*, oil on canvas paper, 18x24, 1995

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So many of the paintings I have attempted are failures. In art therapy, when my intent is divorced from honest emotion, creativity suffers and the painting falls flat. In art and in heart, the creative Spirit only moves when truth abides.

I am assured that I could paint the seascape now because I am connected to the truth. If I were to prayerfully seek God as the mover of the tide and the waves, I could paint it.

*Beautiful Mess*

*Words blend on a page.*

*Short term memory voids.*

*Physical balance and perspective of distance is uncertain.*

*My left side and energy drags.*

*One undefinable mess:*

*blended,*

*uncertain,*

*dragging,*

*voided.*

*Undependable leftovers: bearers of beauty.*

—Donna Fado Ivery, February 1995

The next week my willingness to express gritty honesty during my meditation time is preempted by my drive to see beauty in everything. I am preoccupied with beauty, especially in

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the messiness of life. The song of my heart seems to be spinning on a record player, but I can't feel the groove because the record has been scratched. "Beauty, beauty, beauty," plays over and over and over and over. The nuance, flow, and feel of my prayerful duet with God stalls: It seems I am stuck and can sing no further.

My preoccupation with good denies Spirit's access to help me with the load of pain I bear. Not dealing spiritually with affliction increases my suffering. My days are heavy laden. My up hours eclipse.

During my prescribed down hours I try to see beauty—again, again, again—as if stuck in a groove on a turntable. My distress increases. I pray for rescue. *Lord, lead me to truth.*

Like the weight of the air shifting just before a rainstorm, the atmosphere changes. The spiritual presence of Jesus is palpable. My longtime friend and confidante, He is a welcome comfort. With a finely-tuned touch, Jesus lifts the arm of the needle out of the impassable scratch of my heart and gently places me in a different phrase of my song. In a wisp of a moment my honesty in prayer is restored.

*We're rooting for the truth to win out in you. We couldn't possibly do otherwise. We don't just put up with our limitations; we celebrate them, and then go*

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*on to celebrate every strength, every triumph of the truth in you. We pray hard that it will all come together in your lives.*

*2 Corinthians 13:8-9 (MSG)*